

All Pleasure Is Desirable, Because It Is Pleasing To Us, But Is All Pleasure *Equally* Desirable?

Post by "Cassius" of May 8, 2018 at 8:47 AM

I'll make notes and comment as we go through:

1. As usual, this is the issue: "Epicurus' idea that maximum pleasure is freedom from pain." -- Our disagreement is that I believe Epicurus clearly did not mean this statement in the way you interpret it, in terms of "every respect equivalent." As PD3 says, "The magnitude (quantity) of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain." "Absence of pain" is a measure of quantity, and quantity is only one aspect of pleasure, and not the most important aspect. "And even as men choose of food not merely and simply the larger portion, but the more pleasant, so the wise seek to enjoy the time which is most pleasant and not merely that which is longest."

2. "Didn't Epicurus also believe that we should not seek that which is unnecessary for happiness, but we should enjoy them if they were to come to us?" To this I would say NO - if by the question you mean this to be THE overriding rule. It is clearly "a" rule by which we should structure our lives to be sure that we do not enslave ourselves to desires that we cannot achieve. But "greater pleasure" is the goal and even that rule - and all choices - are governed by the final goal - greater pleasure. "And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose every pleasure whatsoever, but will often pass over many pleasures when a greater annoyance ensues from them. And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure."

3 - "If the goal for Epicurus is pleasure, and if "pleasure reaches its maximum limit at the removal of all sources of pain," is the goal not then complete freedom from pain? " -- YES BUT - only in terms of quantity! If one confuses quantity for quality, then one has confused the goal just as surely as the stoic who confuses "virtue" for the goal.

4 - Now, as to being free from pain being pleasurable, we do indeed agree, but the overriding premise here is "for the living." This is where DeWitt emphasises the point that pleasure, pain, etc. have no meaning except for the living! If we are alive there is nothing mysterious about what we are doing - we are at least going about the daily affairs of life in which we find pleasure if we allow ourselves to and if our circumstances do not prevent it. Clearly, life is worth living at whatever stage we find ourselves, unless we are forced to be in continuing unbearable pain without hope of relief. Life is desirable " And he who admonishes the young to live well and the old to make a good end speaks foolishly, not merely because of the desirability of life, but because the same exercise at once teaches to live well and to die well. Much worse is he who

says that it were good not to be born, but when once one is born to pass quickly through the gates of Hades. For if he truly believes this, why does he not depart from life? It would be easy for him to do so once he were firmly convinced. If he speaks only in jest, his words are foolishness as those who hear him do not believe."

5 - Now here you are separating yourself from the more crusading (😊) of those who focus on "absence of pain" as the full Epicurean definition of "the highest pleasure." I refer to when you say: "I erred if I tried to argue that freedom from pain in the absence of any pleasure whatsoever is desirable. But I do think freedom from pain always results in pleasure in any practical sense." My observation is that most of the time the "no pain" argument is combined with the katastematic/static pleasure argument, and the position taken is that "absence of pain" ("katastematic pleasure") is some new and higher "state" totally separate from the normal pleasures of life, totally separate from any sensual pleasure that can be named, or in your term a "practical" pleasure - and in fact - not a sensual pleasure itself. If you are not going in that direction it will not be necessary to elaborate, but for anyone else reading this thread, this argument is frequently found on the internet, but the opposite position is taken in Boris [Nikolsky's "Epicurus on Pleasure,"](#) in the section on Epicurus in Gosling & Taylors "The Greeks on Pleasure" and in various other resources that can be pointed to [here](#).

Thank you again for another useful exchange. Much of this turns on one's perspective on pleasure, and the closer we examine that issue the better off we are. As I type this I seem to remember that you made a comment that I should have addressed with this:

Oh - here it is - you wrote: "So why is it that pleasure reaches its maximum limit at the removal of pain, unless one can claim that any increase in pleasure is simply an increase in freedom from pain (which seems untrue)?"

I think that is a KEY point that also leads to very divergent views. To me, it is crucially foundational to emphasize that Epicurus stressed that there are ONLY two categories of feelings - pleasure and pain. In any measurement system, if the universe is composed of only two components, then in rigorous terms YES - the absence of one IS exactly the measure of the presence of the other, and vice versa. I believe that if one starts with this canonical proposition a lot of confusion is addressed. "Pleasure" = "absence of pain" becomes an obvious truism and absolutely non mystical, just as in the jelly bean jar analogy one can judge the quantity by saying "jelly beans" = "absence of air" and "absence of air" = "jelly beans." YES, this is true in terms of quantity, but the effect of eating air is much different than the effect of eating jelly beans!

IF one starts with this proposition, which I believe derives from the logical arguments that Epicurus was using against the Platonists (as referenced [here](#)) then the "problem" of evaluating the "absence of pain" statements in the letter to Menoecus and PD3 evaporates. As I see it, the reason PD3 is so highly placed is for exactly that reason. The PDs were ordered largely in terms of priority of who most urgently needed to be defeated in argument (in education).

PD1 - the religionists who say that god controls human affairs must be defeated by showing that gods are unconcerned with men.

PD2 - pretty much everyon who argues that death is a state of suffering to be avoided at all costs (such as by the adoption of false philosophies of virtue) must be defeated by showing that death is absence of sensation, and all evil comes through sensation.

PD3 - the Platonists and others who argue that pleasure cannot be the guide of life because it can never be satisfied, that there is always a "higher" amount to which we would like to achieve, and that pleasure can always be improved must be defeated by showing a logical argument that there IS a limit to the pleasure which can be experienced in human life, and that the limit is the total elimination of pain from our experience. This becomes the logical "goal" which replaces serving gods, virtue, etc as the statement of the "divine guide of life" as Lucretius called it.

I think the problem has largely arisen because the context of PD3 - the necessity to meet and defeat the arguments of Plato in [Philebus](#) and elsewhere, have dropped from sight, and people no longer see the relevance of the argument. Thus the "absence of pain" argument has been left as a "floating abstraction" without anchoring to practicality, leaving it a ready tool for those who want to distort it into a Stoic sword. Obviously this problem existed in Cicero's time as well, since he makes use of it to argue that Epicurus was confusing, but back then everyone knew that Epicureans embraced "ordinary" pleasures and lived active lives (reference Atticus, Cassius, and Lucretius and Epicurus themselves in terms of their crusading spirit). But as the texts were lost and Stoic/Christian ethical viewpoints took power by fire and sword, the essential context fell further and further away to the point where today it is a major challenge to even get anyone to consider it.